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## The present becomes us

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*Published in:*  
Cultural Geographies

*DOI:*  
[10.1177/1474474016646900](https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474016646900)

*Publication date:*  
2016

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

### *Citation for published version (APA):*

Bennett, E., & Linsley, J. (2016). The present becomes us: Embodying the archive. *Cultural Geographies*, 23(3), 525-530. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474016646900>

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*Cultural Geographies*, 23.3 2016, pp. 525-30

*The following text is a dialogue between Johanna Linsley and Emma Bennett on the possibility of translating a performance on which they collaborated into text. The performance, a lecture titled The Present Becomes Us, is based on a science fiction premise: what if the Future is a geographical location which derives its materiality by stealing potentiality from the Present? The premise was created by Johanna, but the lecture was performed by Emma, using the subjunctive mood, and opening with the lines 'This is a performance lecture by Johanna Linsley, or it would be if she were here'. The text explores questions about temporality, geography and the places where histories are made, so that a complex and embodied notion of the archive subtly emerges. The voices of the two writers(/performers) are not strictly delineated, so that in this dialogue as in the performance, a porous and ambiguous understanding of presence and identity remains.*

If we were going to translate the performance into text, we might want a really bang-up opening, to set the scene, so to speak. It might be good to make a note towards that.

If we were going to translate the performance into text, I would want to include this piece of text from the performance (which is already text):

*The Future is a place, it turns out. Its relationship to the Present is not, in fact, temporal, but geographical. The Future has borders and characteristics and what might sloppily be termed a 'nature'. But it has no structure of its own. So it extracts potential from the Present. A complicated algorithm – or not quite an algorithm – that's another sloppy but useful analogy. Anyway, this not-quite-algorithm translates Present potential into substance and, eventually, consciousness. Thanks to this, the Future has features, and a population.*

If we were going to translate the performance into text, I would want to find a place for the science fiction voice of the text of the performance. I would also want to use this piece of text (which is also already text):

*Johanna is trying to draw a sort of connection between her idea about the Future, and other, bigger ideas that other people have had about history and economies and action and political organising and groups and crowds and desire for change and loss and contradiction and gaps between intention and outcome and sites where power accrues and self-determination and solidarity, but she wants that connection to be light, somehow, and she's concerned that*

*instead it's clumsy. She wouldn't draw your attention to this concern if she was here, but it would be there, just the same.*

If we were going to translate the performance into text, I would want to keep the idea of a proposition for a performance that is also, coincidentally, a performance. Maybe, because it would be text and not performance, we could think a bit more about how the possibility of a thing can also be that thing. Maybe I could ask you why that is so ticklish. Is it a joke? I know you write about jokes. Is it a good joke?

If we were going to translate the performance into text, each paragraph would not necessarily have to start with the same phrase.

What would you do, if we were going to translate the performance into text?

If I were going to translate the performance into a text, I would find it difficult to make a start. Or perhaps what I mean is, I would make it difficult to *find* a start. Because, if you're saying the Future is a place, then is not the Start a place too?

It would be difficult to find a starting place because, in a conversation like the one we are having, about potentiality and performance, about places where histories are made, the intersection of temporality and geography can tend to get a little overdetermined.

To help myself, and the other people, the strangers who might become our readers, I would suggest we go to the parts of the text that describe the topography of the Future, the Present, and the border between them –

*The best way to imagine the Present is to think of an imposing and magnificent cliff that is constantly and dramatically crumbling into an infinite sea. Somehow, at the other side of that sea is the Future. 'Other side' is a difficult phrase to use here, though – it suggests two objects passively resting, separated by a stable obstacle. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Future lunges across the chasm as the Present cringingly recedes. From the outside, the Future resembles a cyclone spiked with vast objects.*

If this was a text, one that could be read by a stranger (which it is), I would worry about that stranger getting confused about the various tenses, the

temporal worlds, that are being held together and apart by it. One of them is the time of the performance, the opening lines of which I would include -

*This is a lecture performed by Johanna Linsley, or it would be if she were here. The lecture is about a project based on a science fiction premise that Johanna thought up. It's about the Future.*

At this point, I would have to let the reader know that you wrote a text about the Future, which I performed on your behalf. The future of your text became my present (which is now past).

It might also be good to include a note about whose voice that is, what kind of voice is speaking there.

*I said to think of my voice like the female voice of the system, or the space ship. Not the author so much as the voice that announces what is already underway. The voice of what is happening, of the thing we are in.*

But arguably it's too late for an announcement of what this is because it's already underway. I mean, if there ever was a Start, it was over before we noticed. Like that magnificent cliff, it was pretty unstable.

But, if I were *really* thinking about what it means to translate the performance – a thing that happens in time and space – into a text, I would try to learn more about tenses. I would probably get distracted by their suggestive names: *past, present, future, conditional, future perfect, future perfect continuous, zero conditional, perfect conditional*. I think this is related to science fiction, and to the insurance industry.

If I were really running with this grammar thing, I would try to include a couple of examples, and probably get distracted by their beauty:

*present conditional = that thing would happen*

*perfect conditional = but this thing didn't happen so that thing isn't happening*

I would start to get concerned at this point, that I had strayed too far from the science fiction premise, the one about the Future being a place, so I would just make a holding-note about examples: maybe the exemplary is related to that ticklishness you like so much (the possibility of a thing that also, coincidentally, is the thing). But the difference with an example is that it is a version of thing that is so much the thing it is also somehow *not* the thing.



Yes tenses, yes suggestive distraction, yes overdetermined geographies, yes examples.

Here's an example: Ipswich. If I were to translate the performance into text, I would have to find a place for Ipswich. I would have to let the reader know that I spent several months traveling to Ipswich from London, walking around and talking to people there. I would feel like I had to explain, if readers didn't know, that Ipswich is a town in East Anglia, about an hour from London by rail.

Ipswich was my case study, my example. It's where I assembled my archive, or rather, it's what I assembled my archive from. I identified five locations where potential seemed particularly dynamic, or rich, or fraught. The first location was the Willis Insurance building, part of a district of insurance companies near the rail station. Learning that the town that is fueled by risk management seemed to confirm my sense that Ipswich was a prime spot for learning more about parasitic citizens of the Future, intent on robbing the present of its potentiality.

[insert Figure 1]



The second location was the waterfront area, where a stalled redevelopment project has left a half-finished tower block with its concrete pylons exposed. Local people have dubbed it the 'wine rack', referencing both its gridded

appearance and, perhaps, the aspirational profile of its intended occupants. The third location was the Grinning Rat, once a gay pub, until the landlord's lease was abruptly cancelled by owners Punch Taverns. The fourth was the Ipswich Town Football Club, where I thought about winning, and zero sum games, and community identity. Finally, the fifth was the Christchurch Mansion, a Tudor building which now houses a wonderfully eclectic museum, whose holdings include a collection of Thomas Gainsborough and John Constable paintings, a reproduction of a Tudor kitchen, and a collection of Victorian toys and games.

I made a series of videos in which visual documentation of these locations is paired with an audio recording of a series of interviews between a researcher from the Present and various spokespeople from the Future.<sup>1</sup> I would not like to translate these videos into text.

Ipswich is a good example of an example because it's the kind of town where it's tempting to say 'it's the kind of town where...'. Walking around, I started to think that the whole of British history – Anglo-Saxon settlements and medieval lanes and Victorian industrialism and the neoliberal service economy all attended by waves of immigration right from the start – was all right there, all of it. This also gave me a feeling of skimming, summarizing, which is ok as a starting point, but shouldn't be a finishing point.

Ipswich *is* a good example. You made an example of it. I've never been to Ipswich. But I know that kind of town. I know that kind of town where it's tempting to say 'it's the kind of town where...'. Actually, I thought I knew all about Ipswich until you told me about the covered-over swimming pool in the Willis insurance building. Back in the 1970s, when it was state-of-the-art, when Norman Foster was young and this kind of building was the Future, there was a swimming pool on the ground floor. Surrounded by glass, it was intended for the improved health and happiness of the insurance workers (the swimming pool in the architect's drawings was, I imagine, peopled with these hypothetical bodies). But the insurance workers could never really bring themselves to get into swimming costumes at the office, and eventually the pool was covered over. Because the Willis building is listed, and the pool was integral to the design, they had to keep the outline of it sketched on the floor.

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<sup>1</sup> Johanna Linsley, *Ipswich, or Potentiality* (2014). Made with the support of the Pacitti Company Think Tank.

[insert Figure 2]



Ipswich is the kind of town I might go to in the Future. I mean, one day I might go. Or, I mean, one day, I might have already been. To Ipswich, I mean. In some sense, in some tense, I *have been there*, in my hypothetical swimming costume. But of course, that's fiction (i.e. *that thing would happen, but this thing didn't happen so that thing isn't happening*).

If we were to translate this performance to text, there would likely be some kind of final gesture, and I'm wondering what that would be. It might be important to bring up maps, now, then. There is a map of the Future, or actually there is a photograph of the map of the Future, which may not resemble the map or the Future.



[insert Figure 3]



It's lucky there is a map, because a map suggests the possibility of a journey, and a journey suggests the possibility of an arrival. An arrival is a very good final gesture. Classic.

I'm inclined to hope we arrive back at performance, which is what you did at the end of the subjunctive 'if' of the other performance. You stopped, and there you were: the performer. But the image of the map we have is unreliable, as is the map itself, as is the Future. We are just as likely to arrive in text, or in Ipswich, or in a swimming costume (unbearable).

I don't know. Where are we?